

## 'Imperial doxa from the Berlin republic' [Review] Herfried Münkler (2005) Imperien: Die Logik der Weltherrschaft—vom Alten Rom bis zu den Vereinigten Staaten

Article (Published Version)

Teschke, Benno (2006) 'Imperial doxa from the Berlin republic' [Review] Herfried Münkler (2005) Imperien: Die Logik der Weltherrschaft—vom Alten Rom bis zu den Vereinigten Staaten. New Left Review, 2 (40). pp. 128-140. ISSN 0028-6060

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## REVIEWS

Herfried Münkler, *Imperien: Die Logik der Weltherrschaft—vom Alten Rom bis zu den Vereinigten Staaten*

Rowohlt: Berlin 2005, €19.90, hardback

332 pp, 3 87134 509 1

BENNO TESCHKE

### IMPERIAL DOXA FROM THE BERLIN REPUBLIC

World-political reflections in historical perspective—as distinct from liberal-normative self-congratulations—have been a rarity in postwar federal Germany. Even the short-lived post-reunification hubris that incited secessions in Slovenia and Croatia failed to hasten a resumption and updating of the rich and disturbing Prusso-German discourse of *Machtpolitik* in academia and policy circles. The discursive hegemony of the ‘power of the better argument’, and its Genscherite geopolitical pendant of Atlanticist multilateralism and chequebook foreign policy, remained too entrenched. To all appearances, the Luftwaffe’s reappearance in Balkan skies, wing-tip to wing-tip with NATO allies in the bombing of Yugoslavia, merely uncorked another round of Kantian celebrations. A threshold, nevertheless, had been crossed. Three years into the war in Iraq, publicly deplored but clandestinely assisted by Schroeder and Fischer, Herfried Münkler’s *Imperien* has broken self-imposed taboos by bracketing—naturally, without repudiating—ethical considerations, for a comparative enquiry into the transhistorical ‘logic of empire’, with gratifying sales and critical reception in the Federal Republic.

Emblematic of intellectual and political mutations under way in the Germany of the turning century, its author began his career in left-leaning milieux at Frankfurt University in the 1970s and 1980s. By background a historian of ideas, he was a student, assistant and collaborator of Iring Fetscher, the author of several studies on socialism and editor of anthologies of Marx;

in due course Münkler himself became a long-time member of the editorial board of *MEGA*, the projected 114-volume *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe*. A dissertation on Machiavelli led to a *Habilitationsschrift* on the rise of the idea of *raison d'État* in early modern Europe, and thence to a co-edited five-volume history of political ideas, preoccupations with Clausewitz and Schmitt, and eventually towards a military sociology of war, terrorism and partisan warfare. An editor for many years of the *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, the country's leading political science journal, Münkler now adorns the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Science, and holds the Chair for Political Theory at the Humboldt University in Berlin, a position to which he was appointed in 1992 after the political purges of hold-outs from the old regime at this former East German flagship university. Once a commentator in *Tageszeitung*—Berlin's nearest equivalent to a radical, counter-cultural left daily, however invertebrate—today he is lauded by *Die Zeit* and regaled by the German Foreign Office, to whose Ambassadors' Conference *Imperien* was originally presented in 2004 as an *aide-mémoire*.

Designed as a comparative historical sociology of empires, *Imperien* seeks to distil the essential characteristics and dynamics of empire as an ideal-typical concept, with a view to clarifying current American projects and necessary European responses to them. Though compact in extent, the book is vast in scope, ranging from nomadic empires of the Central Asian steppes, via the *Hochkulturen*, to the Greek, Persian, Roman and Chinese imperial orders and on to Ottoman, Portuguese, Dutch, Spanish, French, Russian, British and Soviet successors. Declaratively, Münkler's interest lies not so much in drawing lessons from this array of past experiences, as in identifying regularities across the historical spectrum that work themselves out largely independent of the volition of their protagonists. 'Political physics' not 'political prudence' is to hold centre stage. The 'imperatives' rather than the 'politics' of empire are what matters. 'An approach that inquires into the logic of empire and its imperatives of action attributes minor significance to the influence and decisions of actors. It rather seeks to identify those structures and premises that define their room for manoeuvre'.

What are then, for Münkler, the essential components of empires? If states are classically defined by sovereignty, bordered territoriality and homogeneous internal integration, generating reciprocal and (in principle) juridically equal international relations, empires are not simply larger versions of them—magnified, but comparably demarcated, units in a geopolitical pluriverse. They are something quite distinct: systems of rule surrounded by political communities (clients or satellites) of lesser and dependent status, open to constant intervention and direct and indirect political management. Within such empires, too, there is always an internal gradient of uneven and decreasing administrative and legal integration between centre and

periphery, with semi-porous and shifting frontier-zones that tend to let out but only selectively let in. No grand strategy is discernible during their initial formation—Seeley's conceit that the British Empire was founded 'in a fit of absence of mind' is generalized with gusto. Imperial dynamics are not reducible to the impact of the centre on the periphery, but co-determined by interactions between the two. If military might and economic power are the mainstay of empires, they also require a legitimating discourse that holds out the prospect of attraction into the imperial fold—eternal peace, prosperity, civilization, free markets, democracy-promotion, human rights. This mission constitutes a self-binding discourse, rather than an ideology in the classical sense; it is neither a set of conscious fabrications nor a form of self-delusion, but a normative pledge that at once restrains imperial rule and relegates those who oppose it to barbarity. If power of attraction fails, a just war can be proclaimed that criminalizes the enemy by imposing a new international legal order—*iustus hostis* becomes a rogue state. Internally, the mission rallies the metropolitan population by rationalizing and legitimizing fiscal and military sacrifices.

True empires, Münkler insists, if they want to be *Weltreiche* and not mere *Großreiche*, require not only an imposing expansion in space but also a substantial duration over time. Crucially, they need to be capable of trans-generational regeneration after an initial phase of charismatic take-off has exhausted itself. On this count—conveniently, of course, for current purposes—the Napoleonic, Bismarckian and Nazi (even, more per-versely, Japanese) ventures drop out of the picture. Indeed, real empires need to have passed through at least one cycle of rise and decline, plus a renewed period of ascent. Spatially, empires tend to be co-extensive with their 'worlds' in the sense that imperial co-existence and co-recognition is a contradiction in terms, leading inescapably to inter-imperial conflict. Exception is made for those cases where 'parallel empires' co-exist, but failed to interact due to their mutual geographical isolation, as in the case of Imperial Rome and Han China. The historical trend line, in any case, leads to a spatial congruence between a single empire and the globe (henceforward including outer space), even though the move towards informal empire imparts a transglobal, rather than a global, character to the American project. While Münkler notionally allows for hegemony as a possible third category, defined as predominance over a group of formally equal actors in which the hegemon assumes the position of *primus inter pares*, in practice his essential classification of political communities is exhausted by a fundamental state-empire dualism.

What are the distinct imperatives of imperial rule? Within their sphere of domination, empires are compelled to political or military intervention to maintain their credibility, prestige and, ultimately, power and influence.

Here neutrality is not an option: Thucydides's Melian Dialogue sets out the reasons why satellites must be kept engaged in and subordinated to the common imperial project. Melos could not stay out of Athens's conflict with Sparta; in more recent idiom, 'who is not for us is against us'. For their part, inter-imperial relations are governed by permanent geopolitical competition over relative standing, a drive towards hierarchization grounded in the demands of power politics and manifested in a series of asymmetric—typically proxy—wars, conducted against minor peripheral powers. These signal prestige and strike-capacity to imperial rivals. Ultimately, inter-imperial hegemonic wars decide the fate of the world order.

If the theoretical construction so far offers a quasi-realist account of geopolitical force fields, in a central chapter Münkler returns to the domestic politics that govern the trajectory of empires. Here, after evoking Polybius's and Machiavelli's political cycles, Münkler appeals to Michael Mann's four sources of power (ideological, economic, military and political) and Michael Doyle's notion of an 'Augustan threshold', to reject either economistic or uni-cyclical models of imperial ascent and descent, for multi-factor and pluri-cyclical explanations of the variable rhythms of rise and decline. Of the latter two theoretical crutches, more is made of the second than the first. In Doyle's version, the Augustan moment signifies a series of fundamental constitutional and moral reforms—in Rome, Octavian's sealing of the transition from de-centralized republicanism to re-centralized authoritarian rule—in which empires terminate their phases of military expansion and enter long periods of socio-political consolidation and imperial order.

The post-threshold era turns an exploitative centre–periphery relation based on military might into a homogeneous zone of civilized peace; arbitrary proconsular exactions into empire-wide fiscal regulation; and differentiated political status amongst conquered peoples into a common imperial citizenship; it diffuses prosperity through widespread investment and infrastructural projects. Octavian's successful conversion of military into political power, a bureaucratic revolution implemented by an incorruptible administrative elite, transmuted the predatory imperialism of the *res publica romana* into a beneficent *imperium romanum*, capped by the new ideology of the *pax romana*. There followed a century of imperial stability and glory, and though decline set in after Trajan, it was staggered, halted and even sporadically reversed by further reforms associated with the names of Diocletian, Constantine and Theodosius. Münkler concludes that 'political communities traverse several cycles of rise and decline and the number of cycles and the duration of each empire at the cyclical zenith depends essentially on the abilities and prudence of their leading politicians'. This startling *volte-face*, flatly contradicting his initial insistence on the primacy of structural conditions and immateriality of agency, is performed without comment.

After discussing the ascent and consolidation of empires, Münkler moves to the logic of their decline. Here he abandons his structuralist programme, shifting towards a more dynamic model of action and counter-action. If not directly defeated in inter-imperial wars, empires run the familiar risks of overstretch and over-commitment—a mismatch between aspirations and resources, already conceptualized by Clausewitz as the point of culmination in a military campaign after which the costs of an offensive outrun its returns. Typically, such overstretch requires withdrawal from economically and strategically secondary regions. While this line of argument is unexceptionable, if mechanistic, Münkler is on somewhat more original ground in his discussion of the asymmetric strategies developed by anti-imperial forces. By blending their own insurgencies with hegemonic conflicts, national liberation movements can instrumentalize inter-imperial rivalries for their own purposes, as Serbia's provocation of Austria-Hungary generated the inter-imperial war between the Triple Alliance and Triple Entente in 1914. No less effective and equally common is partisan warfare: avoidance of pitched battles and refusal to capitulate, followed by a protracted war of attrition between the occupying power and underground forces carrying out low-intensity but surgical strikes against it—the Spanish *guerrilla* against Napoleon, Yugoslav resistance against the Nazis, the Algerian, Vietnamese, Afghan and other versions of anti-colonial struggle. Partisans win, according to Kissinger, if they do not lose; conventional forces lose, if they do not win.

The logic of partisan warfare, however, ends if formal empire turns into informal empire. When that happens, terrorism becomes the most effective form of anti-imperial struggle—a new form of strategic-tactical creativity against an enemy whose sinews of power are flows of capital and long-range military-technological surveillance and control. Given the physical absence of the imperial power in the indirectly controlled area, terrorists have to carry the fight against civilian targets into the centre itself: 9/11. This is the main distinction between partisan warfare and terrorism. Common to both is a delegitimation of imperial promises—of security, prosperity, civilization and legality—in the periphery. Unique to the contemporary forms of transnational terrorism is the negation of the imperial discourse in the metropolitan heartland, undermining hegemonic legitimacy on its home ground by unmasking the limits of its otherwise self-binding mission through the provocation of disproportionate reactions: homeland security, flouting of international law, demotion of allies to vassals, escalating violence, culminating in rising costs and higher fiscal extractions.

What further differentiates contemporary terrorism from partisan warfare of the last century is the alliance the latter so often struck up with Marxism as a recognizable politico-economic programme for an alternative, non-capitalist

path of national development. Current international terrorism, by contrast, is based on an existentialized anti-imperialism that is a radical version of identity politics, revolving around religion, ethnos and culture, with no credible prospect of catching up with and overtaking market economies. The suicide bomber symbolizes this change, which renders any form of compromise or co-existence impossible. The aim of transnational terrorism is not liberation, but devastation. Strategy and tactics contract into one: war becomes absolute. Bids by anti-imperial states to acquire nuclear capacity are efforts to render strategic resources more symmetrical once again, securing immunization against the provocations of empire. Non-proliferation treaties represent an imperial counter-strategy to maintain a critical military-technological lead, especially if they go hand in hand with security guarantees to imperial clients. If unsuccessful, counter-proliferation or pre-emption is on the agenda: North Korea stands for immunity, Iraq for counter-proliferation; Iran is crossing the threshold from the latter to the former.

*Imperien* sets out explicitly to build a transhistorical model of empire. Its subtitle reads: 'The logic of world domination—from Ancient Rome to the United States'. But what is carefully built up as a systematic construct—traits, imperatives, dynamics, threats—disintegrates, even in the course of the text itself, in the face of historical exemplification. Did all empires cross the Augustan threshold? Not Habsburg Spain, not Czarist Russia, not Qin China. Did all empires produce an imperial mission of peace- and prosperity-promotion in the periphery? Not the nomadic empires of Genghis Khan and consorts, not the Spanish *Conquistadores*, only very unevenly the British. Did all empires clash, of necessity, in hegemonic wars of succession? Not the American and the British, nor even the Soviet and American. At every stage along the conceptual chain, it transpires that a plethora of variegated, case-specific determinants, circumscribe and define the *raison d'empire* of each particular imperium. In other words, what finally accounts for any crossing of an Augustan threshold, imperial cycle, construction of ideological mission, management of centre-periphery relations, incidence of hegemonic war, onset of decline, turns out to be historically unique constellations of internal and external conditions that frame the policies of the ruling order in question.

Thus, as with all such attempts to generate universal concepts from sociological ideal-types, Münkler is forced to make continual concessions, exemptions and retractions, while simultaneously introducing a range of sub-types (land-based versus sea-based, commercial versus military, formal versus informal empires) which are themselves subject to further qualifications, as the distance from abstraction to concretion narrows in each particular case. In fact, while the book sets out to demonstrate a ubiquitous 'logic' of empire, what it actually reveals, time and again, are fundamental

differences in the developmental patterns and external policies of the cases it includes. It is this varied historical record that forces Münkler, *sotto voce*, gradually to desist from the universal analytic his work purports to lay out, in favour of discrete comments on this or that contingent experience. If, in principle, an intellectual strategy employing a set of historical empires to select common attributes, capable of forming a reasonably coherent concept with enough definitional precision to distinguish empires from other political communities, may be of some heuristic value, it closes, by the same token, any chance of using the same concept to distinguish between different imperial experiences. Concept and history remain miles apart. Ultimately, Münkler's notion of empire degenerates and decomposes over the length of his book into a hollow semantic shell of little discriminatory power. But what else can we expect in a study that covers several millennia? After all, why should empires of vastly different size, socio-economic dynamics, institutional make-up, civilizational level, belief-systems, military organization and geopolitical environment conform to a common pattern? Why should there be *one* rationality in imperial behaviour—*one* 'logic of empire'?

And, of course, there is not. We are left, in effect, with analogy-mongering. A comparative historical sociology requires explanation of specificities and variations. Does that dictate a retreat from theorization to the thick narratives of ideography? By no means. To see why not, we need only look at Münkler's under-explored distinction between informal (non-territorial and de-politicized) empires, based on commercial flows, and formal (politico-military) empires based on territorial conquest. Nowhere is this dichotomy, introduced in narrative style, rendered into a clear categorical distinction between capitalist and non-capitalist empires. In fact, such a distinction cannot appear in Münkler's typology since he rejects an inquiry into the genesis and social dynamics of empires, opting instead for a political sociology of domination topped up with canonical references to Mann. How blunt this instrument is can be seen at a glance from the way he goes about contrasting empires—Assyrian, Mongol—that reproduce themselves through the politico-military extraction of surplus, with empires whose essential mechanism of exploitation is based on exchange and commerce:

Military expansion, which unfolds as a rule on land, is *politically* organized. It revolves around a ruler, or politico-military elite, who creates the conditions for expansion and directs and organizes military operations. Commercial expansion, by contrast, can also be carried out by private agents, often commercial companies . . . It creates no territorially closed domain of rule; rather, it combines diverse areas into a composite trading zone, connected through trading networks that organize economic exchange.



According to this argument, the Portuguese, Dutch, British and American trading systems represent minor variations of the logic of commercial empire building, categorically differentiated from territorialized empires based on military power. On closer inspection, however, the distinction between public and private, military and commercial, territorial and non-territorial, land-based and sea-based empires, does not hold up. For although semi-private trading enterprises by and large ran the Portuguese, the Dutch and early modern British commercial empires, these chartered companies remained directly dependent on the political patronage and military power of the licence-selling Crown, even in the cases of the Dutch and British joint-stock companies. This 'public-private partnership'—an alliance of Crown and Company—created in turn the exclusive trans-maritime trading empires in which the terms of trade were politically fixed. The monopolization of specific trades and trading-routes required, in turn, the militarization and diplomatic protection of their trading networks—convoys, navies, merchant fleets—generating several co-existing 'territorialized' inter-continental, if seaborne, empires. In this scenario, inter-imperial rivalry over exclusive trading zones took the familiar form of naval conflicts. The sea was not open, but closed. This form of pre-capitalist exchange and corresponding geopolitical competition remained premised on the politico-military might of the metropolitan heartlands that sought, by means of the political exclusion and regulation of competition, to maintain the price differentials between externally linked, but not integrated, markets. Windfall profits were collected in the sphere of circulation—buying cheap and selling dear. By the same token, a long-term equalization of profit-rates for specific trades across the multiple imperial trading zones was impossible to achieve. It follows that there was no world market and, thus, could be no world prices. In other words, these politicized circuits of exchange created formal empires, even though relatively weak powers, like the Portuguese or the Dutch, were often obliged to restrict their ambitions to control over ports and strategic trading posts rather than being able to incorporate wider hinterlands: confetti empires.

This constellation was only to be supplanted by a free-trade imperialism, rather than commerce *tout court*, on the back of the co-development in early modern Britain of a capitalist system of production and capitalist forms of sovereignty and imperial dynamics. When such sovereignty became generalized in 19th-century Europe, however, it was never master over its territory, but already contained a trans-territorializing logic, expressed in the flows of capital that easily crossed borders. In capitalist states, the activities of civil society by this time transcended the territorial confines of 'their' states. Trade between capitalist states could now assume a form not directly premised on geopolitical accumulation and inter-imperialist rivalry, but on economic competition between private agents in a universal market. The transversal nature

of capitalist exchange and generalized competition can, in principle, leave political territories—multiple sovereignties—intact. In fact, it was often the precondition for formally independent state-formation in the post-colonial ‘periphery’: informal empire. Since Münkler has no concept of capitalism (only commercial activity), he has no concept of the origins of capitalism, and this leads him to subsume vastly different experiences of seaborne exploitation under the common rubric of commercial empires.

Such reflections ought not replace one structuralist ideal-type, the logic of empire, with another—the logic of capitalism. For even this distinction between non-capitalist and capitalist empires is not absolute, as capitalist empires adopted strategies of territorialization—the geopolitical dimension of their wider strategies of reproduction—that contravened any pure logic of informal empire. The most cursory glance at the history of international relations reveals a wide gamut of different configurations between territoriality and capitalist states. From the establishment of the liberal trade system of the *Pax Britannica* and the ‘New Imperialism’ of Salisbury or Chamberlain, with its oscillation between ‘formal’ and ‘informal empire’, via the territorially expansive and economically autarchic *Lebensraum* conceptions of German *Geopolitik* and the Japanese project of a ‘Greater East-Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere’, to the us-sponsored (but multilateral) postwar liberal world order and contemporary European integration; the historical record exhibits an immense co-variation in the nexus between capitalist states and projects of territorialization. To negate these historical fluctuations, as aberrations from a ‘normal’ correlation between capitalism and the classical states-system, would be to reify a structuralist view of an essentially invariant international order. The reality is that capitalist states have adopted different ‘strategies of territorialization’, ranging from the grant of full juridical independence to subaltern states, via semi-hegemonic projects like the EU, to systems of outright territorial control in the pursuit of *Lebensraum* or ‘formal Empire’. What an understanding of these diverse strategies of spatialization requires is an agency-centred perspective that emphasizes the variable politics of territorialization, rather than a logic of empire or a logic of capital.

His historical-conceptual survey concluded, Münkler proceeds in the final chapter of *Imperien* to draw out its implications for the current conjuncture. Where are we today in terms of the Augustan threshold? How do his reflections on the geopolitical constellation that binds together the us and EU square with his historical findings? Here, against claims that we are witnessing the end of the imperial age (advanced, among others, by his muse Michael Mann) and the dawn of a new world order, announced by Ulrich Beck or Jürgen Habermas, of global ‘governance’, prospectively humanist in inspiration—notions repeated by countless observers after the end of the Cold War—Münkler reminds us of the fate of post-imperial spaces.

Hobsbawm's *Age of Extremes* serves as a referent. The dismantling of the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires, and the trimming to size of Soviet Russia at Versailles and Brest-Litovsk, failed to produce a stable post-imperial order in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. National self-determination was an idealist pipe-dream and, in conditions of British decline and American isolationism, invited the re-imposition of imperial order—Molotov and Ribbentrop shaking hands in Moscow. With the Hitler–Stalin Pact, geopolitics trumped ideology.

Similar dynamics repeated themselves in the post-colonial and post-Soviet cycles of more recent history. Decolonization and post-colonial state-formation were a function of the Cold War, as the post-colonial state remained dependent on direct imperial support throughout the division of the world into a bi-polar order. The post-Cold War era revealed these states—in Africa, the Near and Middle East, the Caucasus, Central Asia, Central and South America (*sic*) and parts of Southeast Asia—as defective artefacts, requiring imperial re-stabilization. The successor states of the USSR were either re-integrated into or propped up by imperial actors—EU, Russia, US—or sank into the 'failed' category. The post-imperial condition rests on a paradox: it requires an imperial power that provides stability and order until post-imperial actors are fortified as independent states—Niall Ferguson's 'imperialism of anti-imperialism'. Hobsbawm's short 20th century confirms the bloody dialectic between imperial order and multiple state-formation. One might even say that states-systems, or what is erroneously known as the 'Westphalian system', are a world-historical exception, rather than the rule. Even more pointedly: states-systems live off the presence of imperial guarantors.

Given these historical precedents, the current unilateralism of US power politics lies within the trend line of the logic of empire. It is not the expression of a neo-conservative revolution in the US Administration, but the result of the transhistorical imperatives of empire, driven not so much by the subjective belligerence of the centre as by the objective demands of a crumbling periphery. Yet there is a further twist in the plot. For Münkler detects a dilemma at the very heart of US foreign policy. Carefully avoiding the indicative for the conditional, he writes of one scenario:

The US would view itself as essentially the guarantor of intensifying economic relations between Europe, America and East Asia, assuming the role of an 'imaginary total capitalist' [*ideeller Gesamtkapitalist*] . . . whose most important duties would be to ensure the legal ordering of this economic space, to forestall military competition in it, to establish monetary and exchange stability, to maintain technological superiority over its immediate environment, and to provide security against external threats; in short: to carry out those tasks that it has assumed in crossing the Augustan threshold.

The current difficulty is, however, that this prospect is contradicted by another and—for many significant forces in America—no less compelling one: the spread of democracy and human rights to the furthest corners of the earth. There is a tension between imperial mission, in principle boundless in reach, and imperial interest, limited to the trizonal empire—regulated not by ultra-imperialism, but supervised by the hyper-empire. Cautiously, Münkler suggests that a messianic commitment to human rights may constitute a ‘moral luxury’ that could negate the logic of empire. ‘An intelligent imperial policy would turn away from global problems and secure itself by the erection of “imperial frontiers against barbarism”’. Of course, matters are not quite as simple as that. Massive military intervention beyond the imperial heartland does conform to the logic of empire if strategic resources are at stake. Oil is the ‘Achilles heel’ of the us empire, outside its natural perimeter but vital for its economic reproduction, and so—quite sensibly—worth many an expedition to the Gulf:

Military interventions for the safeguarding and control of oil supplies are rational and lie within the logic of an empire oriented towards economic prosperity; interventions to put a stop to civil wars outside the imperial heartland, accompanied by nation-building, are irrational.

But there is a fly in the ointment. Given the imperial mission—peace, prosperity, liberty, civilization—some may demur at the open pursuit of imperial interest in an age of democracy and global media coverage. As one autonomous source of us power, military might, goes into overdrive, another autonomous source of us power, ideological attraction—that ‘self-binding discourse’—ebbs away. The greatest danger for America, Münkler concludes, is not imperial overstretch, but ‘moral overload’.

All this, of course, presumes that the us has crossed the ‘Augustan threshold’. But has it? Münkler prevaricates. In fact, when he arrives at the present, it becomes obvious that the notion is either counter-productive or superfluous. For if the suggestion is that it has not yet properly been crossed, then the billing of the us imperium as a pacified political empire needs to be revoked, as the persistence of ‘out-of-area’ military operations conducted by what remains a democratic-republican polity contradicts the post-threshold logic of empire—inner-imperial consolidation. If, on the other hand, the argument is that it has been crossed, then it has to be shown that the EU and East Asia are incorporated or subsumed into the American Empire; and that some constitutional counterpart to a transition from republican-democratic to authoritarian-imperial rule has occurred within the United States. Nor is it easy to identify much consistency in us foreign policy since the end of the Cold War, as policy-changes and associated ‘self-binding’ discourses proliferate: from ‘full spectrum dominance’ through ‘American primacy’ to

'human rights' and 'democracy-promotion', from 'counter-proliferation' to 'regime change', from the 'war on terror' and back to 'nation-building'. The plain fact is that Washington is not Rome, and Bush is not Augustus, or even—liberal vapourings aside—Nero or Caligula. Münkler's contradictions here are not merely the result of forcing a complex geopolitical conjuncture into the Procrustean bed of an objectified imperial logic of his own imagination, but of his astonishing omission of the wider geo-strategic field of international force. The rise of China and, to a lesser extent, the re-assertion of Russia and India, remain off-screen.

What is one to make of *Imperien*? Intellectually speaking, it might look at first glance like something of a return to the imposing tradition of German historical and sociological reflections on state and power—therewith pre-eminently empire too—that produced the great works of Hintze and Weber. But although Münkler's imperial optic recalls the first, and his recourse to ideal-types the second, in any substantial sense these are quite tenuous connexions. The depth of Hintze's comparative construction of the connexions between feudalism, religion and empire, the passion of Weber's world-historical tracking of rationalization, are far away. Schmitt and Clausewitz remain absent presences, while the neo-Rankean renaissance in German historiography goes largely unnoticed. Münkler's real affiliations, like that of the great majority of his colleagues, are with the Anglosphere. But by the standard of the major historical works of American thinkers in the field, *Imperien* is a lightweight contribution.

At the outset of his work, Münkler remarks that 'if we distinguish between theories of empire and theories of imperialism, we can leave the normative-evaluative perspective that is common to virtually all theories of imperialism behind, and move towards a more descriptive-analytical approach in order to capture the imperial imperatives of action'. The first part of this sentence conveys the intent of *Imperien* more accurately than the second. Münkler, if only by reason of his past, is well versed in modern—Marxist and non-Marxist—theories of imperialism; but these are above all what he wishes to banish from the 'logic of empire'. Imperialisms carry too inconvenient a freight of association: genocide, racism, sponsored inter-community warfare, mass displacements, partitions, plunder, dispossession, slavery, rape, epidemics, famines, to name but a few. Even the most cursory reflection on the tensions between 'self-binding' imperial discourse and imperial reality would require some attention to them, but they disappear from sight in *Imperien*. That does not mean, however, that Münkler abandons any 'normative-evaluative perspective', as he claims to do. Simply, he reverses values, in what amounts to another contribution to the emergent genre of empire-rehabilitation.

For what is its political message? Essentially, that the time of the classical states-system based on territorial sovereignty, diplomatic reciprocity and political symmetry, as the model of a global order, is over. The current imperial drive of us foreign policy not only lies within the historical trend line of the cyclical dynamics of empires. It is actually desirable, as the necessary means to stabilize the world order against threatening intruders—terrorists, migrants and failed states alike. For its part, the European Union needs to become a ‘sub-imperial system’ centred on the axis of Berlin, Paris and—crucially, so Münkler hopes, in the near future—London. To that end, its inner relations need to be streamlined into a more functional and hierarchical system, and its frontiers transformed into flexible zones of differentiated and retractable rights, policed by a Common Foreign and Security Policy, with a corresponding strike force to intervene where necessary in its march-lands to the east and south-east. The prize is to gain—not in conflict, but in cooperation with the American suzerain—a place in the sun.

With these prescriptions, Münkler’s ostensible value-neutrality, invoking the objective record of history in the name of social-scientific concept-formation, capsizes and resurfaces as a normatively recharged set of policy recommendations: a manual for an updated Germano-European imperialism fit for the 21st century. While Weber would have had little compunction in embracing this new gunboat diplomacy, his intellectual code would not have allowed him to hide *gesinnungsethische* convictions behind the façade of scientific analysis. For in the end, Münkler’s geopolitical prescriptions are not the product of a historical derivation, but constitute simply a set of assertions—a politics for empire rather than a concept of empire—driven by the opportunities of the moment. The rehabilitation of empire is carried out with a more flamboyant brio in the Anglosphere, where defence and illustration of the American imperium can be conducted in more swaggering style by writers like Ferguson or Kaplan. But Europe is now producing its own crop of apologists, explaining the need for a subaltern empire in the Old World, in fealty to a global overlord in the New. These are no longer marginal voices. The pioneer theorist of Europe’s imperial mission today, Robert Cooper, has been—in succession—security advisor to Blair in Downing Street, to Prodi in Brussels and now to the roving Solana. Münkler offers a German version of the same vision, from Berlin. *Mutatis mutandis*, his project might be compared to Carl Schmitt’s bid to re-position himself in the late thirties with texts on *Grossraumordnungen* tailored to the concerns of the authorities. The new EU will provide ample space for such exercises.